THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
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CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Oral History Interview

with

Allyson Coleman, Andrew Taylor, and Antwoine Taylor

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Allyson Coleman, Andrew Taylor, and Antwoine Taylor*

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *November 30, 2022*

Transcriber: *Michele Cawley, PhD*

Summary:
Allyson Coleman, Andrew Taylor, and Antwoine Taylor reflect on their experiences participating in the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project pilgrimage.

Notes:
Allyson and her sister, Kim, visited their Grandmother (Artie Taylor), Richard Coleman's mother; not Richard Coleman's Grandmother.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Allyson Coleman [00:00:04] Allyson B Coleman, 62. November 30th, 2022. Lloyd House.

Antwoine Taylor [00:00:17] Antwoine Taylor, age 46, November 30th, 2022. And we're at the Lloyd House.

Andrew Taylor [00:00:25] Drew Taylor, age 23. November 30th, 2022. We're at the Lloyd House. Mom, can you describe your personal history in Alexandria to the best of your ability?

Allyson Coleman [00:00:46] Sure. So, as you know, we moved here from Los Angeles in 2004. And your dad and I really wanted to be closer to Auntie Kimmy and your grandfather's sisters, Auntie Alma, Auntie Clai and Auntie Marian, so that you could develop a relationship with your grandfather's side of the family since he passed away in 1980, before you were born in '99. So Auntie Kim, also had come out here to go to Howard and she was supposed to move back to California and she did not move back to California. So that was another reason. That was another reason why we had to move out here, because she reneged on her, let the record show, on her promise. But anyway, the only job I applied for was with the City of Alexandria to manage a residential program and behavioral health. And so we're still here,18 years later. And during that time I transitioned into doing work around cultural and linguistic competency, and that led me to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. And then that led me to race, and social equity, and social justice work, which as you guys are aware is my primary role now in the Department of Community and Human Services. But, your grandfather's family has a long standing roots in Virginia, specifically Louisa County, near Charlottesville. And he used to take me and your Auntie Kim to visit his grandma, Grandma Ardie Tyler every summer in Charlottesville. But of course, we never got to meet our grandfather, Richard Beverly Coleman, because he died June 2nd, 1925, before my dad was born in August 7th of 1925. So unfortunately, while your father never met his father, he also didn't learn about his grandfather, Henry Coleman, who was born in Louisa County. Everybody, all the Coleman seem to be born and died there. And he was born in 1857, not sure when he passed away. And, but his great grandfather, Major Coleman, was born in 1815, died in 1876, and fought for the U.S. Colored Troops in the Union during the Civil War. So your grandpa, Richard, would have been so proud to have known that he had fought for civil rights, being that he attended the March on Washington in '63. And that our current fight for long overdue race and social justice was passed down through the generations. So, you know, I believe in providence and divine guidance. And while living in Alexandria was not on my list, I truly believe that we were meant to be here for this time and especially for going on the pilgrimage. So, I will ask your dad about why.

Antwoine Taylor [00:04:01] Why it- how's it feel to describe a family history?

Allyson Coleman [00:04:18] For a long time, I have wished that I had more connection with going beyond my grandfather and grandmother, you know, going deeper down the lineage and had deeper roots. And as I've been doing this work, the anti-racism work, and understanding how much that was disrupted in terms of some people can go back so many generations and know their family and know the people and know what they did and know what they look like. And they have pictures and it's been passed down, those kind of stories, even though I have some stories. But the stories are closer to, you know, it's my cousin telling me about our aunts and maybe one generation behind that, but that was it. And my father didn't live long enough. I was in my twenties, I was about 20 when he passed away, and so he didn't even have a chance to share those things with me. But I knew that he was just how he wore dashiki, who he hung out with, and all the different things that

he did. I knew. He told me so early on to read The Autobiography of Malcolm X. You know, he said, you need to read this. They're going to, whether they ask you or not to do that. And so he provided all those kind of, that guidance. And in going through that lineage, it's also a way to call the ancestors into the space. Those who have come before us. So that we could be here. And to do the work that we do. Which is heart, mind, soul, body, spirit work. And it takes everything that you have to dismantle the system. And so the crew that I work with, they're awesome. And one of the things that we say is that we want to leave a little less for this generation and future generations to do. And so we're doing all that we can now, in this time, in what we believe is the third Reconstruction period, to continue what the ancestors have done before us. So going to the pilgrimage, there was no question for any of us about whether or not we were going to go and participate.

Andrew Taylor [00:06:55] Speaking of the pilgrimage, thank you for that insight. I would like to ask my dad, you know, can you explain why you chose the pilgrimage? I know your path is a little different than my mom's. So just give us some more information about that.

Antwoine Taylor [00:07:14] Will do. My answer won't be as eloquent as your mom. Once it was presented to me by your mom and by you, and you guys were very excited about going on this pilgrimage. And for me, being a lover of history and growing up in Oakland, California, having the Black Panther mindset, watching all these historical places on TV and learning about Selma, The March, all of the history that's in that area. I felt just going as a unit and experiencing that as a unit, going back in time, so to speak, once we go down there. And being foundational Black Americans, meaning having history and lineage in this country, especially in the deep South. Being able to go there and to witness historical monuments, walking down the streets, imagining the struggle that was going on during that time period with the climate that they were in. Being able to see Martin Luther King's home and where it was situated and where it was. The proximity to all of the things that we saw and what was taking place. Just trying to feel that energy, that was, that was there, that was left by those ancestors and being able to see you and your reaction to seeing all of this history. Being able to walk down the same streets, see the same homes, walk in the same stores, and just imagining what was going through your mind and then being able to talk about it. Talk about your experience. Talk about what you feel. How you're taking everything in and coming from where I came from, as you know, in my experience growing up and just being able to see you [pause] experience that with me as your father because I didn't have that. And and it's kind of passing on a love of history, appreciation of ancestors. And you know your mom. She was emotional when "I love this because my, my, my, my guys are here with me." So. and having your mom here, too, as as that balance and. Unexplainable. Can't describe it. So just feel like generations are coming together.

Andrew Taylor [00:10:36] Ma, why did you decide to attend the pilgrimage? And what did it mean to you that you went as a family instead of coworkers and friends?

Antwoine Taylor [00:10:59] Right, get her in trouble.

Allyson Coleman [00:11:02] Echo everything that your dad said in terms of us all being together as a family. You know the different experiences that we've been through in terms of our activism. And so that meant the whole world for me was like a culmination of so many years of, you know, marching, of attending the anniversary of the March on Washington of, you know, for rights and work and anything that we can be involved in and give our voice to. You know, that was really

important to me. But the other part of it was that to have a sense of protection from both with both of you there, because of the depth of feeling that, you know, that I have for the work and for the people and just knowing that you would be there and understand and walk that, walk it with me. Honoring Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas, learning about their lynchings and having lived in this city and doing this work in the city and realizing how much more work is still left to be done. And they were lynched in the late 1800's. And so it was just a way to pay homage to those who have been- who have put us in the place now where we can continue the work that they've been doing. And talking with your cousin, Diane, over the Turkey Day, as you know I call it "food, family, fun, friends," you know, a "football day" because the real holiday is a lie, predicated on lie. So we don't mess with that. But in talking to your cousin, Diane, and letting her know that we were going to be doing this, she sent a letter. And I just want to read a little part of it, because it was a letter that I had sent to Grandma. And Grandma lived to be, I want to say this, your Grandfather's mother and Artie and she lived I want to say 101, I believe it was. She was 101 years old. So, and you never- she passed away before you were born as well. But I sent this letter to your grandma in 1986, she was living in Charlottesville, Virginia. That's where your auntie and I used to go visit all the time with your grandfather, Grandpa Richard. And I remember sending her a letter, but I don't remember that I had asked her what is written here. And so I said, I was just thinking, Grandma, that I would really like for you to write to me and tell me to what your childhood was like. I mean, what was America like for a black woman? Also, what were you doing during the March on Washington and the sit ins? I mean, what was happening in Virginia during our fight for civil rights? I know it has taken me a long time to realize this, but you have lived through and been a part of the greatest changes in the history of this country. I would appreciate knowing everything that you want to share with me, especially your personal feelings about what was going on. How did it feel to live under Jim Crow laws and how did you fight back? Grandma, you are filled with so much important knowledge and information and I could kick myself for not being smart enough to ask you these things much earlier, like during my trips to visit you so we could talk about this in person. What was the world like when the automobile was invented and when movies were invented and television? She was born in 1894. Please tell me about as much as you possibly can so I can have a better understanding of my family and of my people, Black people. The Black family is falling apart and black youths are being destroyed and destroying themselves. We no longer have a sense of our own history or culture, and I would like to have firsthand knowledge of what black people experienced from someone who has been through it all. I respect and admire you for all that you've been through, and I hope you will share your many experiences with me. So your cousin, Dianne, and Aunty Cly laughed when I sent that to her because they were like, "Grandma is not going to be able to share all that with you". But they held on, this is a copy of the letter. They held on to that letter for me. And that's something that we want to pass down to you, Drew, for you to hold on for future generations as well. So had to be there to represent and to just say thank you to those who have done the work. That we're standing on at this time.

Antwoine Taylor [00:16:18] Mr. Drew. Can you tell us why you chose to go as a young 23 year old man in the social media age who had a whole lot of other things he could have been doing?

Andrew Taylor [00:16:33] So my experience and reasoning was a little different from my parents, naturally. So where at least a generation or two spread apart. But my to keep it simple, I wanted to make. Imagination into as closer to reality as I could. And by that I mean growing up in elementary, middle and high school. I would read about civil rights. I would read about the South. I would read about a lot of these things. And sometimes they were accurate. Sometimes they weren't. Thanks to

my dad, he would make sure that I had the accurate information. But imagination to reality really just means enough, enough reading and more feeling and more experiencing. When I heard about the opportunity to not only go to the South, the Deep South, but to. Witness Martin Luther King's house and to see where people marched to go to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which I learned about for 8 to 10 years in school. It was a huge unit. And I would always wonder, well, how was it like, you know, we would have videos, they'd be in black and white. And the closest thing I could get to experiencing what they went through without going through it myself was coming on the pilgrimage and just being able to feel the energy. It's a different energy in the South compared to Virginia. The infrastructure is the first thing I noticed that was different. I mean, it almost looked like. It was still the sixties. And although from a normal tourist coming in and just driving by or just stopping by and looking at it, you may think, well, they haven't really done much with this. They haven't built much. But for me, I actually thinking about it. I preferred it to be like that because it showed the authenticity of how it was in the sixties, seventies and even part of the eighties. And it just showed me what was really there, not something that was gentrified, not other buildings that were built over 20 or 30 years. But it showed me, you know, 50 or 60 years ago, people walked these same streets. The buildings look similar. And that gave it a more real feeling to the trip. So that was my reasoning behind going was to make, you know. The things that I learned in school, which were some of the things that my parents experienced. I'm learning about my mother and my father's lives and my grandmother and my grandfather's lives. This was an opportunity to learn but also feel also see. And, you know, so that was the main reason I chose to go on the pilgrimage.

Allyson Coleman [00:20:00] So, baby, what were your favorite memories from the pilgrimage? I mean, can you describe some of the things that you really enjoyed seeing and experiencing?

Andrew Taylor [00:20:14] The first. I wouldn't say this is a memory, but it can fall into that category. It's really a cliche, but just being the most simple thing, just being there was the greatest memory I could have taken away. Because there is so much truth and power in just standing on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, walking down to, you know, dinner barbecue shops that have been open since the forties and fifties. You know, having those experiences of just almost breathing in that air and feeling that energy was more impactful to me than any specific monument that I saw. But specifically, my favorite part, the part that I was waiting for since we got there was walking the Edmund Pettus Bridge because I had seen so many videos, heard so many stories about horrific, how horrific it was to walk the bridge and hearing in class that a five year old or six year old walked the bridge, is, doesn't give enough justice and credit to those people who were kids that are now adults sharing their story. You know, hearing a woman speak about how she was six or seven years old walking the Edmund Pettus Bridge, fighting for justice, going to jail. You know, nowadays, six or seven, you know, you're on a tablet, you're on TikTok. It's a much different age. So being able to hear firsthand how it was is something that no history book has ever given me, nor can it just because of how raw and authentic the speakers were. So that was definitely one of my favorite parts. And then my last, the last part that I really enjoyed was going on a bus tour and seeing just the agriculture of the South. You know, I've never seen cotton on a farm until I got to Alabama. I didn't know that still existed. Once again, you know, Northern Virginia's much different than Alabama. But just seeing things that I had read so much about and heard so much about come basically come to life was something that has to be my favorite memory.

Allyson Coleman [00:23:08] And I'm guessing having the opportunity to meet John Lewis when he came to your high school, I'm sure that probably played a role in in that, too. So Dad what about you? Your favorite memory?

Antwoine Taylor [00:23:24] The barbecue. Oh, barbecue was outstanding, by the way. So whoever's listening to this, go get some barbecue in Alabama, in Montgomery. First the drive down. hanging out with you guys. driving down. And the conversations about what we may see, what we may experience, what we want to see, and hoping that it is what we imagine it to be. The Legacy Museums. Because I love history and seeing most of the history that I knew and learning things that I didn't know and just being able to be in that space, something that was primarily for us. And it's out in front, it's out in the open, it's raw. Also going to the part of the Legacy Museum where they had the lynching pillars and realizing that every state in the South had multiple pillars of people being lynched. Sometimes whole families, including children, were being lynched. Drew, when you and I were reading on the side of the wall the reasons why people were being lynched for looking at a white woman, he was lynched. For refusing to tell on someone, he was lynched. And there were a whole lot of other absurd reasons why people were lynched. So being able to see and be in that moment experiencing it with as a unit again where you can ask questions. We can talk about it in the moment and we can see in the moment what it was. And again, you just honoring the ancestors, being silent. Thanking ancestors, but for going through this. So, you know, I don't have to go through that kind of lynching like like they did now. Neither do you. Things are are different. It's a different kind of lynching, unfortunately. But the brutality that they had to go through, just being a person, that was different. Spending the time with you guys talking, chatting, laughing, you know, watching your mom cry every 5 or 6 minutes about something, you know, that's just what it is. So just the whole experience within itself was a great memory. And hopefully, you know, you'll do the same when you have kids in ten years minimally.

Allyson Coleman [00:26:45] I will say it was the most painful, but it was the most poignant and one of my favorite places was the Legacy Museum as well. It really hit home. It connected the dots on that peculiar institution. It showed the damage to those individuals who were enslaved at that time, who were stolen and enslaved. And then, how everyone profited by that except for them, obviously. But how that built our economy in this country. And it just connected the dots from state to state to state to state, where they told you, you know, gave you all the specifics about how they profited from that. And if, I love Audrey Davis and I'm so I hope I'm not misquoting, but I believe she's shares when she talks about Alexandria's history was that we had the second largest slave holding or, you know, or seller of human beings, you know, in this country during that time. So I just think that to be able to see how prolific it was even in New York, we were looking all, you know, there was so many different places where you think, "Oh, no, it didn't happen up North." No, it was happening almost everywhere. And everyone was profiting off of black bodies. So when we say we built this country, we mean literally, we built this country, we built the economic system. We did all the things that you couldn't, wouldn;t or whatever didn't want to do for yourselves, for your families. So, yeah, we did all that. Loved, you talked about the bus, the tour, the bus. Love Joanne Bland. She's one of the women who went across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. She's the one who God bless her. She called it a march. We know. We were just, we were walking. But she because she had crossed that bridge, that she had marched across that bridge and she was there and as you said, very, very young, she showed us what it was like, the way that we needed to stand. We had to be two by two. I mean, she guided and directed us, you know, while we were there, which really added to what you saw in the movie Selma and what you studied about. So she brought life to that for me and the fact that

she was still trying to build up our people and build up the youth when we went to go meet her. And I can't remember what the location was, but we went to meet her and she was talking to everybody, but particularly focusing on the youth and wanting them to understand the importance of what had been done before and the power they have now to do even more. So I think those were some of my favorite memories, yeah the barbecue was good too. That was cool.

Antwoine Taylor [00:29:34] Barbecue was like that.

Allyson Coleman [00:29:35] Yeah, you like the barbecue.

Andrew Taylor [00:29:42] Thank you for sharing, you know, your favorite memories. That's very important.

Allyson Coleman [00:29:48] Yeah, it was the idea, a challenging moment.

Andrew Taylor [00:29:50] But on the flip side, you know, where there's light, there's darkness. So, any challenging moments about the trip, if any? And if so, what were they and how did you feel during those challenges? I want to hear more of how you felt, you know, touch on what happened. But how did you feel during those challenging moments?

Antwoine Taylor [00:30:23] For me, one of the first challenging moments was when we went to the first part of the Legacy Museum where we kind of met in the hall and they were going to-.

Allyson Coleman [00:30:36] The legacy annex that we were transferring the soil.

Antwoine Taylor [00:30:38] Transferring the soil. And when politicians are pointed out as being important, people in that moment, bothered me. No one was there to acknowledge politicians. We were all there to acknowledge the passing of soil for two young black men who had been lynched in Alexandria. Their families should have been deemed important people at that time, not a politician, not a former mayor, not anyone in city politics. And it angered me because, again, you're here for a photo op it seemed. You're here because it's a popular thing to do. You want to be seen. So to me, that comes off as fake and not genuine. So that angered me quite a bit. Another thing that that angered me, and I'm sure we talked about it, is when we were at Martin Luther King's home. And if you're going to talk about this is sacred ground, his home and you just kind of walk across the grass to walk to the backyard if it's sacred ground treat it as such. Walk around on the sidewalk, you know, like we did. That bothered me. If you're praising this place and holding this place up as a sacred place, and then you, immediately to me, disrespect this sacred place by just, you know, kind of walking on the grass that bothered me. Another thing that bothered me, kind of challenging was, like you mentioned earlier, seeing that the city itself seemed to still be stuck in the sixties. There still seem to be segregation in that city. It was desolate. It was economically starving in Montgomery. And you can see it. You can feel it. You can see it in the people. So those were some of the things that bothered me and some of the challenges. I know we're kind of running short on time. So.

Allyson Coleman [00:33:02] Yeah, so I echo that and I really want to move to that last question, because I want to give voice to someone else that also participated in the pilgrimage who I reached out to, which is what changes do you want to see in the city of Alexandria when it comes to dealing with institutional racism? And so I reached out to a colleague, Kim Hurley, who also went on the

pilgrimage with us. You guys met and we all hung out together. And and she just captured this so brilliantly that I couldn't find the words for. And she says, "As I'm thinking of changes I'd like to see in the city of Alexandria related to institutional racism, the first thing that comes to mind is really digging into dismantling the culture of racism and white supremacy that exists in Alexandria as a community and city government. I'd like to see expanded community based activism and engagement, the emergence, organization and support of community and residents, resident led demands for accountability in our institutions, including an elevating voices of the unheard and deeply impacted. I'd like to see the city government move beyond offering performative programs, events and activities, and focus on actions that result in real changes and outcomes for the most marginalized people who call Alexandria their home. Those who struggle to maintain and survive, to see themselves in the history retell and to be fully embraced in and by our community. I understand we are still quite a ways from the broad changes I'd like to see, because so many people in both our community and government have a less than a foundational understanding of equity and how to build it, so it may be wiser to start there. I'd like to see Alexandria come to a place of collective understanding and of what institutional racism is, how it has, and still impacts us all. And for us to build a collaborative plan that empowers us all as active agents in dismantling what exists and rebuilding toward our self determined liberation."

Andrew Taylor [00:35:21] Thank you, Mom. That was quite. And Kim Hurley that was quite descriptive and empowering. To finish off, I would like to thank you both for making the decision to go to the pilgrimage for yourselves, but in large part to leave a legacy with me and my potential children in 15 years. So that meant a lot to me. As you said, we were the only black family to attend this pilgrimage. So that, you know, decades on in line, it may be historic. And you guys have not only taught me about activism. Talk with yourselves about activism, but this puts a stamp on your passion, Mom and your mission Dad. So thank you, guys.

Antwoine Taylor [00:36:37] Very well put, son of ours. Thanks for coming to this pilgrimage, because, like I said, you could have been anywhere in the world, but you chose to drive twelve hours down and twelve hours back with your parents.

Andrew Taylor [00:36:54] Once in a lifetime.

Antwoine Taylor [00:36:56] Same with your parents. So it was a wonderful experience to drive down, to have that experience.

[00:37:05] Son To eat barbecue,.

[00:37:07] Dad- To experience the legacy museum, to experience the different faces, especially of the young people from the city of Alexandria High Schools and and seeing them learning and light bulbs switching on in their heads, too. So it was a great.

Allyson Coleman [00:37:27] And with that said, as someone who was knee deep in the work, shoulder to shoulder with those who you already know, I will also say that it helped me understand how much more work to do we have, and that performative aspect was so on display there. So one of the things I didn't talk about was the challenges, because I wanted to get that last piece then in terms of what we envision and hope for, for Alexandria. But one of the other challenging things was that to see that the political, the performative, to, that we're not as far down the road as some of us

had hoped we might be. But that helps us to understand where we are and what we need to do and be aware of moving forward. So we still have hope. But that piece sort of stung a little bit for myself and other colleagues who are doing that work and doing and having that experience in a mixed race group. There were some black people I know who did who wanted to go but would not go in a mixed race group because for us, it was sacred. It was, there were a lot of tears. There was a lot of realization. We didn't then learn our history like everyone else has learned their history. And so and to be able to do that in a space where others who are, you know, the dominant culture, you know, how would that look like? How did that feel? There was an inhibiting factor with that. So that's something for us to think about on the next journey that we plan around, you know, social justice.